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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000393

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TAGS: PTER ASEC PGOV MOPS ET
SUBJECT: ANECDOTES ON UNITED WESTERN SOMALI LIBERATION
FRONT (UWSLF)

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Pol/Econ Chief has debriefed two Somali-speaking development workers who have recently traveled throughout Ethiopia's Somali region regarding reports about the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF). While we cannot independently verify the information provided, the consistencies in details conveyed by the two unrelated sources suggest some degree of credibility. We offer interagency readers these anecdotes on this emerging terrorist force.

STRONG UWSLF ENCROACHMENTS

¶2. (S) Both sources reported anecdotes of the encroachment of well-organized and fairly large UWSLF forces into Ethiopia's Somali region and of a responsive up-tick in attacks against them both by the Ethiopian military (ENDF) and insurgent Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). While one source argued that the UWSLF forces throughout Somali region may compose as many as 3,000 fighters, the other source claimed that a primary UWSLF concentration located between the towns of Warder, Degehabur, and Kebri Dehar had at least 700 fighters with another concentration of unknown number located in Fik zone. Both sources noted that the UWSLF fighters appeared well organized and in uniform; one argued that they were Eritrean military uniforms. One reported that they move about via pack animals and on foot rather than in vehicles, but reported that they have an abundance of Thuraya satellite phones.

NATIONALIST ONLF COUNTERING EXTREMIST UWSLF

¶3. (S) Both sources noted a widespread recognition among the local population that UWSLF is an extremist, terrorist organization aimed at control and imposing a radical version of Islam on the people. The sources argued that UWSLF's extremist orientation has led the ONLF to actively fight against their encroachments. One source added that the ONLF's fear that the UWSLF presence could further drive the limited humanitarian assistance that was reaching the people from being available as another cause for the ONLF's aggression toward UWSLF. Both emphasized that UWSLF is ideologically driven and spans across clan lines while the ONLF is sub-clan based but secular and nationalist. One source noted that a former ONLF leader had joined UWSLF recently and had been dispatched from Eritrea to attempt to breach the gap between the two groups, but was killed by the ONLF during an attack. They conveyed the popular perception among locals of close links between UWSLF and al-Shabaab and argued that UWSLF can and does seek refuge in al-Shabaab

controlled areas within Somalia when countered. In addition to retreating into Somalia, one source argued that UWSLF fighters had also retreated to the Shilabo and Danan areas as well as along the Ethio-Somali border.

CONTINUED ENDF OPERATIONS

¶4. (S) In addition to the attacks by the ONLF against UWSLF, both sources noted that ENDF attacks against UWSLF were also increasing. In addition, the Somali regional government has also recently established and trained "special militias" from among the Ogadeni sub-clan to counter both UWSLF and ONLF. One source argued that these "special militias" are in addition to the regular militias partially composed of forced conscripts from rural villages forced to fight the ONLF. Col. Gebremeskal, the ENDF commander for Gode and Fik areas told one source "we will solve the insecurity problem soon; we are planning to take all necessary measures soon." Without clarifying whether this was reported by the commander, the source suggested that the ENDF's approach would be to launch an assault between Kebri Dehar and Degehabur first to cut off access to Somalia before advancing toward Fik.

CLAN DYNAMICS

¶5. (S) Dividing the Somali region along clan and sub-clan lines, one source offered the following analysis of where popular support lies:

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-- Within Warder zone, only the two Ogadeni woredas are insecure while the Majerteen areas remain secure and do not require escorts. Ogadeni woredas are mostly insecure due to the presence of the ONLF, though there is some UWSLF presence. The Danot area, which is mostly occupied by the Ogaden/Michael sub-clan is more pro-Ethiopian government (GoE), largely due to the presence of a former ONLF leader who shifted to support the GoE.

-- Fik zone is largely populated by the Ogaden/Abdullahi sub-clan which is predominantly pro-ONLF.

-- The Degehabur area, which is largely occupied by the Ogaden/Rer Isaaq sub-clan, is divided between pro-GoE and pro-ONLF areas, with the Degeh Medo area largely pro-ONLF.

-- Within Gode zone, the four non-Ogaden woredas are largely secure, while the Ogaden/Abdallah sub-clan in Gode and Adadle woredas leaning pro-GoE and Danan woreda split between pro-GoE and pro-ONLF elements.

THE PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE

¶6. (S) Both sources reported a prevailing sentiment in Somali region that people are tired of getting caught in the middle of fighting between the ENDF, ONLF, and UWSLF. Some groups who have supported the ONLF are also lending a bit of support to UWSLF due to their perception that the two groups are fighting a common enemy in the GoE. At the same time, many ONLF supporters are reportedly shifting to support the GoE as they are seeing increasingly that non-Ogadeni Somalis in the region are not supporting the Ogadeni cause and recognizing that without broader support the ONLF will not be able to make change. Additionally, some are recognizing that the non-Ogadeni areas, where there is relative stability, are benefiting from that stability through some modest public social sector investments such as schools, health clinics, and roads.

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